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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3631  
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD PRIORITY 0097  
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SUBJECT: AT EU, SWEDEN PUSHES IRAQI REFUGEES OVER  
REPATRIATION

¶1. (U) On June 24, the local media ran an op-ed piece by Migration Minister Tobias Billstrom calling on other EU countries to take in more Iraqi refugees. That same day at the EU Ministerial meeting, the EU did not address the issue to take in more Iraqi refugees. According to press reports, this was because Iraqi PM Maliki requested the EU not to take further initiatives that would counter Iraqi repatriation.

¶2. (U) Billstrom's political specialist, Kristina Lindahl, told emboff that the op-ed was written and published based on a draft EU text, which changed somewhat at the Ministerial. She said Sweden supports the decision to organize a repatriation settlement program, but would have preferred additional wording urging EU members to take in Iraqi refugees. A EU volunteer study trip to Iraq is being planned in conjunction with UNHCR prior to the start of the EU's repatriation program scheduled for 2009. Sweden intends to participate.

¶3. (U) Comment: It seems that Sweden underestimated its ability to influence other EU members to agree to accept more Iraqi refugees. Sweden has taken in almost 60 percent of all Iraqi refugees to the EU and is feeling the heat domestically as its social welfare program is being overtaxed. Sweden is a top EU destination country for asylum-seeking Iraqis, both legal refugees and illegal immigrants. Sweden's generous policies allow asylum seekers to stay and receive government assistance while awaiting a decision--a process that often lasts more than two years. Swedish authorities have had difficulty repatriating the 10-15 percent of Iraqis denied asylum for reasons including absconsion, lack of transit visas through Jordan, and domestic opposition over returning asylum-seekers to a "war-torn" country.  
SILVERMAN